The 7 democratic virtues of liberal education

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Inaugural lecture | Prof. Dr. Teun J. Dekker | 31st January 2019

On the occasion of his appointment as Professor of Liberal Arts and Sciences Education

Maastricht University UCM

You just have to take a moment

every now and then,

to realise how much beauty, ingenuity and brilliance

there is in this world of ours

Once upon a time, a great ceremony was to be held. A marriage. The Goddess Philology, representing love of learning and study for its own sake, was to wed Mercury, the God of socially profitable action. As you can imagine, this was a promising match; science and academia have great potential to benefit our communities. However, at the same time, this is not an obvious combination, as there are huge differences between the two. And so, to make this marriage work, Philology received, as a wedding gift, 7 bridesmaids: Grammar, Rhetoric, Dialectics, Geometry, Arithmetic, Astronomy and Music. And so were born the 7 liberal arts.

This is the story the Roman scholar Martianus Cappela tells us in his 5th century book "On the 7 Disciplines", which codified the classical understanding of liberal education. Since then, liberal arts education has been understood and institutionalized in many different ways. And yet, throughout its history, the idea of connecting love of learning and social usefulness has always been essential. It was certainly central to liberal education in ancient Greece, where it sought to prepare citizens for participating in direct democracy. It was no less important in the American liberal arts colleges of the 19th century, which sought to rethink higher education for the newly independent nation.

We in Europe are in the middle of a great flowering of liberal arts education. While this development started relatively recently, maybe 20 or 30 years ago, it has been striking. At the moment, there are over 80 undergraduate programs that self-identify as offering a liberal arts education. In this country, 4,030 students started a liberal arts and sciences program last year, making it the 6th most popular course of study. We may have gotten used to thinking of liberal arts education as a niche phenomenon, but it is not so niche anymore. As it continues to develop, it is important to reflect on what liberal arts education is and isn't, especially in the European context. But we must also think about what it hopes to achieve, whether it does so, what challenges it faces, and how it may continue to evolve. Above all, we must ask how European liberal education fits into the tradition of bridging learning and society, and making the marriage between Philology and Mercury work. Hence, anyone who cares for liberal arts education must be profoundly grateful to Maastricht University about creating this professorship, and I am humbled by the trust placed in me through this appointment.

As I look around me, it seems that the marriage between science and society is in need of some assistance. And nowhere is this more obvious than in the state of our democracies, which are not doing well. One might point to a coarsening of much political discourse, a decrease in the quality of political debate, an inability to take important measures, a lack of willingness to compromise between parties, and an absence of legitimacy of whatever measures are enacted. This is deeply problematic. If our democracies do not function well, they are unlikely to be able to solve the big challenges our societies face, from climate change to security, to sustaining the welfare state. At best, this will mean that those problems will not be solved. At worst, it may lead to erosion of support for this form of government.
And the problem is not limited to the political

Full house at the Minderbroedersberg

system. We see a similar lack of trust, civility and legitimacy in the interaction between citizens and politicians. But also in how we interact with each other, as colleagues and neighbours.

One should never take democracy for granted. It is, in many ways, an exception. Most countries are not fully free and only 40% of the world's population lives in fully functioning liberal democracies. Freedom House notes that, for the 8th year in a row, this number has gone down. If we want to sustain our way of living together, we need to invest in the quality of our democracy.

Democracy is, in effect, a conversation between various actors. This happens in political matters, but also in many other social contexts. Any situation in which different people come together in freedom and equality to make joint decisions is a kind of democracy. It happens in the household, at the university, in the workplace, just as much as it happens in government. In all these cases, differences of perspective and different preferences must be somehow overcome, to arrive at a social choice. This can be said to constitute a discussion. However, there are many kinds of conversation, with different rules and purposes. It is important to distinguish between two types of conversation that may happen in democracy. One kind of conversation is an adversarial negotiation, the other is a joint exploration of an issue.

One should never take democracy for granted

An adversarial negotiation starts with multiple parties that have a clear idea of what they want; they have their own private analysis of social issues, their preferred solutions to political problems and a clear sense of what they regard as right or correct. Those who have a different vision are simply wrong. People seek to get as much of what they want as possible within the constraints of the rules of the game. Democracy is war by other means.

If this is how citizens regard the nature of the democratic conversation, this might explain some of the pathologies many democratic societies are currently experiencing. For if one regards the democratic process in this way, the goal of political discourse is to make opposing interests look bad, uninformed and generally unattractive. Coarse and unflattering language is a useful tool in this context. Similarly, from this perspective a debate is competition, a wrestling match in which the goal is to make one's opponents look bad, to embarrass them, to show that their ideas are foolish and that their solutions will not work.

From this perspective, compromise is undesirable. At best, it is a form of negotiated defeat. One knows the solution one desires from the outset, and compromise means that one does not get all of what one wants. And even when compromises are achieved, they have no legitimacy. While they may be the best that was achievable under certain circumstances, they remain suboptimal. So despite the fact that one may have to live with them, one does not regard them as one's own. Hence any compromise is tentative.

However, one may also understand the democratic conversation in a different fashion; one can regard it as joint exploration of the issues facing a society, with the goal of discovering which solution is best for the community as a whole. The purpose of this special kind of conversation is not to get what one has already decided one wants, but to discover what different courses of action are available, what their consequences are, what effects they have on different people and groups in society, and to weigh these effects to settle on a solution that, all things considered, serves society best. Participants see their interest as finding that solution, and they are willing to regulate their conduct in those discussions to serve that goal. They are open to changing their assessment of issues in response to the contributions of others, and actively seek to understand matters from different perspectives, knowing that this may reveal important insights. This is the true democratic conversation.

If citizens enter into such a democratic conversation, the democratic process unfolds in a different way. For one thing, coarse language and rhetorical tricks have no value, because they undermine the process of joint exploration by obscuring other perspectives. A political debate is an opportunity to explore issues and understand what the consequences of different solutions are from different perspectives. This goal results in a different style of debate, one that is less concerned with making opponents looks bad than it is with engaging with fellow citizens' ideas. Compromise, in this context, takes on a new meaning. It is not a negotiated betrayal of one's interests, but rather the outcome of the process of finding the best solution for the community as a whole. Since that was the point of the democratic conversation all along, it is not to be avoided as a second-best alternative, but rather actively embraced as a better solution for having gone through the political process.

Having this special kind of conversation is difficult. We have all been in discussions with the best of intentions to keep an open mind and work together with others. But as the discussion heats up, you feel yourself slipping into a different mode, and you end up yelling at each other. It may be our nature, it may be our culture, but either way, the truly democratic conversation does not come naturally. Rather, it requires a whole range of skills, knowledge and dispositions. These are things that must be taught. Teaching them is how democracy sustains itself from generation to generation, and how we make our children into citizens.

If we want to save democracy and foster this kind of conversation, we must do a better job of teaching future generations not to give in to the temptations of the adversarial negotiation.

Our society teaches young people how to have democratic conversations in all kinds of ways. Families and friends play an important role, as do the media and the art that our children are exposed to. But one should never underestimate the role education plays. Much has been said about the role of primary and secondary education in this process. However, universities must also play their part. This is a legal duty, as noted in the Dutch law on higher education, article 1.3. But, more importantly, university education takes place at a time in one's life when one becomes an independent member of a community who is expected to participate in collective decision-making and to take responsibility for one's behaviour in that community. Furthermore, the capacities and dispositions that doing so requires are of a higher order, which psychology tells us only develop around the time young people go to university.

However, just as in the case of the marriage between Philology and Mercury, this is not without its difficulties. Science has evolved in an autonomous fashion. Research has become increasingly specialised, focussing on smaller and smaller questions. These are pursued by dedicated groups of researchers who form isolated communities of peers. What matters is progress in these narrowly conceived disciplines, as measured by the approval of those peers.

Universities in Europe have organised themselves around this way of doing science. They have partitioned themselves into faculties and departments, offering narrow, disciplinary programs that see themselves as training future researchers. More than anything, they value peer-reviewed articles that impress a scattered network of experts. No doubt, this way of doing science has resulted in great progress, but it has also made it difficult for the university to provide education that teaches students how to have a proper democratic conversation. Once again, the marriage between Mercury and Philology is in need of assistance.

And once again, the liberal arts stand ready to bridge the two. For liberal education can teach young people to have a real democratic conversation. It gives students at least seven things they need to do so, the seven democratic virtues of my title. While I could explain from a theoretical perspective how liberal arts education does this, that might express my own wishes more than the reality. And so, it seems to me there is no better way of demonstrating my thesis than by listening to students in these programs themselves.

Over the past months, I have had extensive conversations with many dozens of students in a number of different liberal arts programs, in order to understand the significance of their education to them. Many of the things they have told me reveal how their experience equips them for having a real democratic conversation. Of course, this approach cannot show how liberal education is different from other kinds of university education in this respect, and students might be mistaken about how their education shapes them.
And perhaps liberal arts programs simply attract democratically inclined people. I am aware of all these limitations. But this is my party, and I can think of nothing more festive than to share their voices with you.

And that is also why I will not be reading out fragments from these conversations myself. As you will have noticed, as I walked down the aisle just now, in my dress, I was accompanied by 7 students, my very own bridesmaids. They will present some of the things students have shared with me that illustrate how liberal arts education, as practiced in Europe, fosters the skills, knowledge and attitudes required to have a proper democratic conversation. I have edited the quotes as little as possible, to preserve their authenticity.

Rianne Letschert and the 7 'bridesmaides'

Epistemic Humility

Perhaps the first thing that one needs to realize in order to have a proper democratic conversation is that one does not have all the answers before one enters into a discussion. For if one believes that one already has the unequivocally correct solution, one cannot enter into an open discussion in good faith. All one can do is to try to convince others. That means that one must be epistemically humble. One must, as one student put it:

Leave the egocentric view of viewing the universe. Which is so difficult. Because I have to not see myself to be the centre of universe. Looking at things from different angles, realizing that the world is perhaps a lot more complex thing than you thought, that the very notion of truth can be questioned. That there are a lot of different perspectives.

Another student pointed out:

If we forget about the job market, career plans and all of the other things that we talked about, I think being in this kind of an education makes you more humble. It teaches you that your way is not the only way.

This realization was often felt to be a painful process, leaving one, in a sense, lost.

Before I came to the liberal arts and sciences program, I had very, very many opinions and views on what I thought to be right and wrong. Now after two years, I rarely have any opinions about anything, because I just question everything. That makes me sometimes feel lost, because it is easier and it feels more stable to have opinions. Now when I discuss about politics with friends from years ago, and they know me as the one who's very opinionated and now I'm just saying well, "I cannot make any statements about it because I don't have an opinion." That doesn't feel very good but I think it's still a process and I think it will give me a very valuable result in the end.

Epistemic Humility

But at the same time, they clearly saw the danger of believing in only one objective truth:

People are predisposed to some ideas they like and they adapt and then they see more similar ideas here and they say, "Okay, this is the ultimate truth then," and they become more opinionated and less critical.

the very notion of truth can be questioned

Critical Thinking

This leads quite naturally to the other side of epistemic humility, the idea of critical thinking. For while one should not enter a democratic conversation with an unshakable conviction about the best course of action, one should not be impressed by other people's claims of having found the ultimate truth either. If one does that, one surrenders one's place in the democratic process and the conversation ends before it gets started. Rather, one must constantly be willing to challenge conventional wisdom, approach every opinion with caution and stand ready to challenge grand narratives. For these grand narratives threaten to suck the oxygen out of the democratic conversation. Students felt this was one of the most important things they got from studying liberal arts:

Just by giving you insight in so many subjects that one is careful of the authoritative statements of people that say, "I have figured I out now. After thousands of years, guys. Listen to me. I got it." You can say, "Yes. Maybe you got something, but let's be careful. Maybe your idea is not completely refined yet. Let's talk about it."

As another student pointed out:

But it is more that you learn a certain way of thinking and develop a sort of open mind, also to approach any disciplinary question and to be able to navigate. Not always be stuck with one field.

What is that certain way of thinking?

This might sound a little bit cliché, but I think having a really critical tendency towards things that are generally accepted has caused me a lot of trouble at family gatherings or with family or friends, but I think it has really sharpened my view for things and for problems, for stuff that is normalized with others or normalized in the eyes of others. I think this is really something that is crucial.

Moreover, students are often quite explicit about how the education they receive teaches them this critical attitude. One student remarked:

Well the criticalness, that's just what's stressed all the time, to always question, always be critical about it, always try to get deeper into it. In most of my classes we have the different literatures and we compared them and we could see the contradictions that they have and still the vital points that they make, so just be very reflective of liberal arts and to question that. Then, most of the time we would also then apply this to real life cases, so that you see how does the theory then play out in the real world and then we see a lot of the things that you take for granted. When you question them, then you might see the different perspectives to it.

And while this constant questioning might make you sad or get you into trouble at family gatherings, some ultimately experienced it as liberating:

Well, for me, with the experience that everything is criticized and questioned and by this, you're really pushed to see all the boundaries that are set upon you by society or your personality or psychology or whatever. That might be a hard experience to acknowledge or to recognize all these boundaries. Once you recognize them, you can overcome them and maybe see how you can free yourself from them and distance yourself from them.

Critical thinking

Sense of Self

While a proper democratic conversation requires one to be open to different perspectives and to not uncritically accept grand narratives, it also requires some content to get anywhere. Individuals must contribute from their own understanding of the world and their own expertise. They must have a deeply held identity, values and interests that they bring into the democratic conversation. This requires that they develop a sense of self, an understanding of who they are, and what they believe to be true, if only in a personal sense.

Many of the students I spoke to recognized that this is something liberal arts education contributes to. I asked one student who said that liberal education was for students who want more from their education, what the more was. He said:

Personality is more. Maybe by personality, I mean getting into a relationship with yourself, and then being able to find a place in society from where you can add, and also to question this place.

Sense of self

As another student expressed it:

It's about becoming a person that you would be proud of being, maybe.

Now, that last "maybe" is significant. Some students felt this was a very difficult process. When I asked a student about it, the response was:

I think that was a very, very difficult question for me in particular, studying with an ambition to understand who I am because, I am now, for about half a year, in an absolute identity crisis, so I'm just-- I don't understand myself any more at all and I think LAS has contributed greatly to this crisis.

Nevertheless, students recognized that the stress that a demanding liberal arts program places them under is what they need to discover their own perspective:

Personal development is knowing your limits. By knowing your limits, and going to your limits you can get to the core of who you actually are. If you go to your limit, you can see that your true moral character is revealed. It is under circumstances of stress that you are most yourself. I think that this liberal arts and sciences concept can really push people to moments of personal stress, or academic stress, or social stress. It really shapes people in one direction or another, which I think is good.

But the prize at the end of all this struggle was a deep sense of ownership of one's studies:

Ownership, this is my work. I designed this. This is my personal curriculum. No one else has this curriculum and I decided to do exactly this. There's no one telling me, "Oh, you should have taken this course, or that one." No, I am the one who can now at the end of my studies say this.

And more fundamentally, an appreciation of one's own identity, of how one wants to live one's life and what one wants to bring to society. As one student remarked:

I really learned what I find important or how I am trying to live my life, even though I'm not fully sure where I'm exactly going after this. I know that I have certain ideals or principles and just a general idea of how I want to treat the people around me. Actually, also very practical ways of going about it, which I like about the liberal arts as well because it has so many-- it isn't just fully theoretical, but also the questioning and asking yourself or analysing yourself helps you to just overcome some character flaws or develop character traits that are, I don't know, really productive when you want to live among people.

Sense of Others

Of course, a proper democratic conversation also requires a sense of the other, the fourth democratic virtue of liberal arts. One must understand the position of other people with different backgrounds and perspectives. In part, this is to understand the impact of different choices and decisions on all people affected by them. Only then can you take into account their interests and weigh them in the overall calculus. But it is also intrinsically enriching, or so many liberal arts students argued. One said:

A good person is someone who tries to see beyond his or her own horizons. For example, that entails empathy, that entails that I do not only consider knowledge as being measured in numbers, it allows me to really see who is that person who am I talking to in this specific moment and what is important to him or her. Because that's what we get taught three years throughout this curriculum. There are so many different persons and they all want something different from this program. This is why I think that makes you a good person, seeing who is there.

I sometimes hopelessly wish that everyone else will be able to see something from the other person's perspective. It seems simple but it's really, really difficult to do at times either because you're just stuck in your own way of seeing things or just unable to understand where someone else is coming from.

This was felt to be important, if for no other reason than to argue more effectively:

You also need to know, okay, why would they disagree with me in the first place? Is there a reason why they don't like my idea? Then you have to yes, place yourself in the other person and then you also see okay, well, if I want to ban the Qu'ran, for instance, and I want to convince someone, what does that mean for the other person? To convince someone else of your argument you need to know why the other would be opposed to it in the first place.

One of the things students felt was most valuable about their educational experience was how it exposed them to different perspectives and how that gave them a sense of others. Moreover, they felt this was integral to their education. As one exclaimed:

How does liberal arts teach you that? That's the model!

To which another added:

Definitely being in contact with people from international backgrounds. Being in contact with other languages. Being in contact with people who are very different. It made me more tolerant. It made me more open. It made me more relaxed in just being around difference. I think unfortunately, many of us are confined to a space that doesn't have a lot of difference and a lot of variety before we get to university. If we dive straight in, just like I did here, and everybody else that comes here does as well, I think, that's incredibly valuable experience. It's so interesting. It's so much fun to be around this kind of diversity.

Some students were acutely aware of the fact that liberal arts programs do, on occasion, privilege a progressive, academic perspective.

I guess a lot of the classes I took in human diversity, you would read about different sorts of people, but always through the eyes of somebody who is similar to you in a way, like a progressive of some sorts.

Sense of others

And some realised that one should not be uncritical of the perspectives of others, regardless of their content:

I think I want to meet more people who are really different from me, but I also have all this, I do strongly believe that it's important to not be racist, for example, so I don't know. I don't know how exactly to empathize with people who are different from me in that respect, when it's something that also matters to me quite a lot.

But nevertheless, many reported that studying liberal arts gave them a profound sense of the different perspectives that people may hold:

I think you read about a lot of different cultures and perspectives and positions that you can have in society, whether they're advantaged or oppressed. I think that learning about that has made me very aware of all the social positions that you can take up.

A good person is someone who tries to see beyond his or her own horizons

Compromise

Having a sense of one's own perspective and that of others is one thing. But a proper democratic conversation is more than an exchange of perspectives and backgrounds. The real substance of any democratic process is how those different perspectives are reconciled and merged into a jointly created and jointly owned decision, an outcome that no one intended, but everyone regards as their own. Learning this ability to compromise is something students recognize in their experience. One student remarked:

To engage in something that-- It's a bit of weird term but I think it makes sense, where you- we have an actual discussion and not a debate where you try to just win and convince somebody of your argument, but where you- as you do in a dialogue. For example, you take the other standpoint. You maybe disagree with certain arguments. You try to phrase it in a more charitable way and maybe find some common ground and then you can agree on something. That's something- that is a skill that you can't learn in a one semester course. You have to do it and then do it again, and get feedback and get re-evaluated, make your own experiences. That's something that this liberal arts program's done to me for a long time.

One of the crucial ways in which liberal arts programs fostered this ability to compromise was through insisting on group work. After all:

In fact, life is a group project in itself.

One student elaborated:

Sure, sometimes you're in a group and you all have the same vision and you want to work on this one thing in pretty much the same way, perfect, and reach a compromise and sometimes you're a bunch of people who all have their own ideas. Everyone wants to do their thing and then you need to find a way to work with that, to reconcile those different ideas. Yes, and I would say that's something that is quite present.

But it wasn't only the experience of compromising between different people that students considered significant. It was also the weighing of different disciplinary perspectives:

We also have to do a thesis, and I already did it, and you have to do it with other students and you have to arrive at a common conclusion. You are writing separate chapters with different disciplinary backgrounds, but you are to integrate it.

Most academics, or many academics, at least in history and economics and so on are used to writing a paper on their own and with their own perspective and you are saying, "These are the perspectives of others and this is what I have to say. This is my opinion." You also have to do that in the thesis, but you also had to make that compatible with what other people are saying and arrive at a common conclusion. That is not always something that completely reflects your own thoughts. In that sense, I had to compromise some. I'm sure, I know my fellow students also had to compromise somewhat in terms of the answer.

At best, this experience gives students the ability to sustain democratic conversations. As one remarked:

For example, I had a conversation with my sister who has a job and she said, "You know, the person that I'm working with is not from around here and whenever we speak I accidentally insult him and he accidentally insults me. Then we both get mad and we leave the room."

I think what liberal arts has taught me is to not really leave the room. To stay in it and to really just continue discussing and continue learning and making something happen. If you keep it at the level of just discussion and you never either write it down or create a project, you don't realize the implications of whatever it is that you were discussing.

Compromise

Knowledge of Common Problems

Citizens in a democratic society are expected to participate in conversations about many different issues and topics that affect our communities. To do that effectively, citizens must have some basic knowledge about the common problems we face. One hardly needs to be an expert, but it is important to know a little bit about a range of social issues. After all, as one student pointed out:

Well, in my view, a good citizen in a democratic society is a citizen that's a little bit aware of what's happening around him. With liberal arts, it's also a lot of what current issues that are happening, so in that sense it makes you a good democratic citizen.

Having an ill-informed citizenry is a danger to any democracy, and some students were well-aware of this:

Yes, definitely, because with current events-- It's the same, as people must know the history and people must know the current events to see what's happening again and what they can solve and-- A lot of things, if you look at current events, you can see how easily they can be solved if they look at what happened 10 years ago when the exact same thing happened, and they can fix it again. I think if you ignore current events and you don't face them and you don't talk about them, you don't discuss them, then they can very easily either be swept under the rug or they just accumulate, accumulate, accumulate until you have Trump for president and that's a very rough thing to have.

The core courses that are typical of liberal arts programs and the fact that one is expected to experience many different disciplines contributed to students' general knowledge of a wide range of issues:

In my case, I think that after this I will be able to have expertise in some regions of biomedicine, but I will also know something about religion, about literature, about music even, about cultural studies and I will be able to contrast these expert opinions on protein function in the cell. I will be able to talk about this in relation to other things that I have touched upon. Of course, I don't have expert knowledge in literature, but that's a little bit of knowledge I can take, and which will make me better.

But more than that, many students agreed that impromptu discussions also contributed to a more informed understanding of social developments:

Maybe but it sounds very cliché. You keep being interested and keep having conversations about topics, not necessarily things you discuss in class, but just things that pop up in the news, interesting stuff you read. "By the way did you hear about 'bla bla'?" The entire conversation erupts, about this and that factoring in, and what about, "Remember that and that. I see some patterns from history, by the way did you know that this and this happened before?" Everything is just related to the topic, it just keeps on floating around and I think that never ends.

I think that especially intensifies what we are doing. It's not active studying, it's just that you keep having interactions with fields and things, and just mundane things, that happen and then put them into context, basically immediately. Because someone brings it up and you're just like, "oh yes."

Sense of Democracy

However, being able to have this conversation is not enough. One must have not only the skills, but also the inclination to participate in a true democratic process. For short, one must have what might be called a sense of democracy. This is an effective disposition to regulate one's behavior so that it contributes to the joint exploration of issues and makes the community a better place. One must have an honest desire to discover and do what serves the community best, even if, in some narrow sense of the good, one might be better off if one presses one's own advantage. This sense of obligation to make the world a better place and to take responsibility for the greater good is seen by many as integral to liberal arts education. One student remarked:

You have an effect on the world no matter what you do, or no matter what choice you make. I do hope that the ones who studied LAS also tend to or at least see that, that's the way how things work in a way and then also try and use it and seek to change the world, not only for change in general, but change for the better. And in a very principled way talk to their children and say, "Okay, well, the way I leave this world is better than when I got into it, and to change it for the better in the long term."

And while many came to their programs with this ambition, just as many reported that studying liberal arts actually changed them, instilling in them a desire to make a contribution to the community.

I think, when I started the program, I always said I'm not somebody who wants to make the world a better place. I'm not this person who wants to save the world. Then I was very surprised by all the others' dreams of creating NGOs and of going out and doing something. I always said to myself that's not my aim. I have shifted a little within the course of my study, in that now I think, "Well, I want to do something valuable in my life." Still, not that I would go out and try to solve the crisis in the world but maybe on some small scale.

Okay. How did you get out that attitude?

Yes, I think it was just reflecting upon what does work mean to me? What does studying mean to me? How do I see myself and the society? How can I use my strengths for anything that I do? There I saw that I liked using my strengths for others and for making others happy and contributing and doing something good.

Part of this change seems to be inspired by the content of the program, and how liberal arts education tends to expose students to all kinds of injustices and problems. As one of my conversation-partners noted:

I mean, you're learning about-- because we obviously identify a lot of struggles and issues and problems that are going on, ranging from climate change to human rights issues, economic crises and which, if you sort of, I think a lot of us face that moment in time where you've gathered a lot of information and you just feel a little bit hopeless. Why the world is not as ideal as we wish it to be, and I think that goes hand in hand with the active participation. Once you've had that moment of hopelessness the very minimum you can do is, for example, vote and I think in this way, you are much more inclined to participate in the process.

Knowledge of common problems / Sense of democracy

But what was even more important was the experience of living together in a community and participating in the life of that community:

Having an on-campus community teaches you that there is something beyond yourself. There's a community that we all live in that's beyond yourself. And participating in extracurricular activities, which I think is a big part of liberal arts and sciences, helps you develop yourself and develops how you behave in a community. Which, then will be reflected in how you behave in a society as a good citizen. I'm not sure if you can call it a good citizen, but you'll be a tolerated citizen, that's what I would say.

Conclusion

Liberal arts and sciences education in Europe is a complex phenomenon; it is about way more than preparing students for their civic futures. And the voices of the students I have shared with you today present only a very partial view of this particular aspect of it. In many ways, the picture I have painted is naïve, and overoptimistic, something of a fairy tale. But I did start with "once upon a time", so I gave you fair warning. Moreover, I have left out many issues, and many challenges liberal arts education faces. There is much more to research and think about. That is as it should be, especially when a new professor is inaugurated. I'm working on it.

But, if nothing else, these voices demonstrate that liberal education matters, and that it is a wonderful gift for society to give to future generations, and thereby to its democracy. If you will permit me just one quote from the best song ever written about teaching, Stephen Sondheim's *Children Will Listen*:

What do we leave to our kids when we're dead?
Only whatever we put in their head,
Things that our parents and teachers have said,
Which were left to them too.

That is perhaps the nature of all teaching: we pass on what was given to us. We may add some things, rephrase and refine, but, in the end, we are part of a great chain. And so, on this occasion, I feel obligated to briefly look back and to look forward.

Firstly, looking back, to those who helped me get here: Friends, teachers, colleagues, my dear parents and family: thanks for accepting me for who I am, for seeing beyond the craziness. I get it, I am weird. I can be exhausting, bounce off the walls and if I think you have not done things the way I think they should be done, I will not let you forget it. But hey, if you can't take me at my worst, you don't deserve me at my best. So, thanks for seeing through it, and for giving me a chance. I hope it has paid off.

And thanks to all those great writers, thinkers, artists, dreamers, philosophers, and lunar travellers who have made all the awesome things that have excited me so much. You just have to take a moment every now and then, to realise how much beauty, ingenuity and brilliance there is in this world of ours. And whenever I do that, I feel so grateful, but also so indebted, as if I have received more than I could ever give. But then I realise that even the greatest thought is worthless if it isn't communicated to others. So let me share those thoughts and ideas with other people, and in that way repay my debts.

And so, looking forward, perhaps we should end this ceremony with a vow. That no matter what happens, no matter where the scene is laid, I will keep devoting whatever time and energy I am granted on this earth to sharing with young people whatever I know about philosophy and about life, and about the relationship between philosophy and life, doing whatever I can to help them understand themselves and to be understood.

Author's note 1/7/2020: This last sentence contains elements from sentences that have been meaningful to me. In particular, I have drawn inspiration for it from Vladimir Nabokov (and, through him, William Shakespeare), Leonard Bernstein and one of the students I interviewed. I had intended this as a sort of easter egg, a private homage to my heroes, and felt that this was appropriate given the fact that this was the most personal section of the lecture and that it concerns how education is using what has inspired you to inspire others. However, upon rereading a year later, I must admit that there is a good argument to be made that unacknowledged references are never appropriate in an academic context; the lines between plagiarism, homage and inside-jokes are sometimes hard to draw. If I could do it again, I would have acknowledged the references for the avoidance of doubt, and I regret not doing so. In the interest of transparency, and after consulting with the confidential advisor on scientific integrity, I feel the most honest course of action is to add this explanatory note.

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You have an effect on the world

no matter what you do,

or no matter what choice you make